

Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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TUNISIA: More Troubles Ahead [REDACTED]

Summary

The prospects for stability in Tunisia are poor. President Bourguiba's failure to address the root causes of growing popular discontent is radicalizing Tunisia's pragmatic religious leadership and trade union, has provided new opportunities for Libyan meddling, and may prompt intervention by the armed forces in the post-Bourguiba era. Civil disorders similar to the bread riots last January could occur with little warning and accelerate the erosion of government authority. This bodes ill for US interests in the region. Opposition to US policies among newly radicalized Tunisians is growing, and may soon prompt the government to assume a more pro-Arab and non-aligned foreign policy. [REDACTED]

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Moving Toward Crisis

After Tunisia gained its independence from France in 1956, President Bourguiba enacted broad social and economic programs designed to modernize Tunisia at a gradual pace. These policies have brought steady economic growth, a relatively modern social and economic infrastructure, and a basically Western-oriented way of life. They also have generated unrealistic popular expectations for prosperity and opportunity, as well as an

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uneasiness about the country's national identity, especially among the country's youth. (Over 70 percent of the population is less than 27 years old.) Moreover, as Tunisians have gained broader educational and social benefits, they have chafed under a political system dominated by one man, largely closed to all except Bourguiba's handpicked elite, and increasingly insensitive to public opinion. [redacted]

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Bourguiba has maintained a stranglehold on power, stifling political expression and forcing the government to rule from an increasingly narrow power base. The US Embassy in Tunis reports that ruling class insensitivity to popular needs led to the decision last year to double the price of bread, the staple of poor Tunisians. The riots that followed in January left hundreds dead or injured, several thousand under arrest, and seriously dislocated economic plans. [redacted]

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The riots highlighted the declining popularity of the ruling Destourian Socialist Party--the country's principal political institution. Party leaders failed to anticipate the intensity of the reaction to the price hikes. Moreover, party members did not respond to government efforts to mobilize them to help bring the disorders under control. The riots finally ended when Bourguiba ordered in the Army and abruptly rescinded the price increases. [redacted]

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The Leadership Vacuum

Bourguiba in recent years has, with a few exceptions, divorced himself from the main currents of national life, ignoring Tunisia's growing social and political problems. The 82-year-old President for Life is nearing the end, dwelling on past achievements, and increasingly out of touch with the forces influencing Tunisian society. [redacted] Bourguiba's age and failing health permit him to deal with only one or two issues a day. [redacted]

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[redacted] Prime Minister Mzali--the President's handpicked and constitutionally designated successor--has further hurt government authority. Mzali's failure to fulfill promises to supplement incomes of the poor to protect them from the bread price increases helped trigger the January disturbances. His statements concerning the restoration of the increases--leaked by foreign newsmen--prolonged tensions and further discredited the government. [redacted]

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Mzali's blatant effort to put the blame for the bread riots on then-Interior Minister Guiga, one of his chief political rivals, further damaged his credibility outside official circles. A Mzali-appointed commission investigating the causes of the riots recommended that Guiga be tried for treason for presumed political disloyalty during the disorders. [redacted]

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The US Embassy in Tunisia says that poor Tunisians believe the government is unfairly indicting Guiga for his unwillingness to order the killing of protesters. We believe that Guiga misjudged the intensity of the riots and that the poor performance of the security forces clearly exposed operational deficiencies caused by their mismanagement under Guiga. We see little evidence, however, of a politically motivated effort by Guiga to weaken Mzali by withholding the security forces. [REDACTED]

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We are unsure of Bourguiba's attitude toward Mzali, although he apparently intends to retain him as prime minister despite his political liabilities. [REDACTED] Bourguiba was unhappy with Mzali's performance during the bread riots. [REDACTED] however, suggests that Bourguiba later changed his mind and that he is pleased with Mzali's efforts to prevent a recurrence. [REDACTED]

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The "Corrective" Movement

Despite his political ineptness, Mzali is one of the few government leaders who is aware of the depth of the problems Tunisia faces, including the need for political reform, according to the US Embassy in Tunis. Recently, however, Mzali has favored easing discontent through economic development. He apparently shuns political liberalization because it would antagonize the authoritarian Bourguiba and thereby weaken his position as prime minister. [REDACTED]

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Press reports indicate that Mzali is giving priority to development projects in the poorer southern and western regions where the bread riots began. Tunis has lobbied for increased aid on concessional terms from the United States, Canada, Western Europe, Australia, Saudi Arabia, and several regional development organizations. Tunisia also has solicited a loan of \$70 million from France for food imports and balance of payments support. [REDACTED]

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Mzali has revised the budget at Bourguiba's direction following the disturbances to lessen the burden on the poor. The new budget shifts more of the cost of development to the middle and upper classes by increasing taxes on items such as liquor, cigarettes, and gasoline. It retains government subsidies on bread and other cereal products. [REDACTED]

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These measures, however, have so far failed to placate the poor. Disadvantaged Tunisians say that Mzali's programs are not working and accuse him of protecting the interests of a corrupt privileged class that siphons off welfare funds meant for them. Moreover, the US Embassy in Tunis reports that poor Tunisians are

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concerned over the continued erosion of their purchasing power by inflation, a problem they believe the government has ignored. The Embassy says this is causing restiveness among the poor and fostering the view that the government gives with one hand and takes back with the other. [redacted]

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The Opposition--What Next?

Radical Muslims are particularly interested in exploiting discontent because of Bourguiba's long record as a secularist. [redacted] quasi-legal fundamentalist groups are acquiring a growing following in the urban slums and countryside, among university students with poor job prospects, most dangerously, among lower and middle ranking members of the armed forces. Attempts by Tunisian security forces to check fundamentalist activity have so far failed. Members of the mainstream Islamic Tendency Movement (ITM)--the country's largest fundamentalist organization--claim credit for fomenting some of the bread riots last January, even though many leaders of the Movement were imprisoned several years ago. Security officials have confirmed the participation of fundamentalists, but the extent of their involvement is unclear. [redacted]

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Bourguiba's continuing rebuff of ITM demands for legal status in our view is eroding the political strength of pragmatists in control of the organization. Several ITM leaders stated recently that they were having difficulty restraining their younger, more radical members from agitating against the government. The ITM leadership supports policies based on a return to more conservative Islamic doctrines to halt what it regards as the moral decay brought about by Bourguiba's strong secularism. More radical Muslims in the ITM and among small Islamic extremist groups want to replace the government entirely with religious leaders. [redacted]

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[redacted] radical student members of the ITM at Tunis University sponsored the recent protests against the appearance on campus of Minister of Family and Women's Advancement Fathia Mzali, the wife of the Prime Minister. We believe that the militants, by their open opposition, were attempting to increase pressure on their leadership to take a firmer antigovernment stand as well as to further discredit Mzali. The demonstrations have indirectly stimulated more popular discontent by prompting the heavyhanded intervention of security forces on campus. [redacted]

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The country's trade union leadership is under similar pressure from its more radical members to wring political concessions from the government. The militants within the General Union of Tunisian Workers (UGTT)--the country's main labor union federation--are calling for a more confrontational approach to achieve a more equal distribution of wealth and power between workers and privileged Tunisians. The radicals have sponsored major strikes against the government to achieve their

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aims. There were violent labor protests in 1978 requiring Army intervention and the arrest of key labor leaders. [REDACTED]

Several wildcat strikes early this year prompted UGTT Secretary General Habib Achour to publicly urge negotiations. Achour has so far been able to maintain a delicate balance between representing the workers and cooperating with the government, but without government concessions he will be increasingly hard pressed to maintain discipline. [REDACTED]

The Army--Where Does It Stand?

The officer corps--drawn from the Tunisian establishment--has a strong stake in stability. The swift and effective performance of the Army in suppressing the 1978 labor riots and the bread riots last January demonstrated its leaders' loyalty to Bourguiba's political order. Moreover, the Army's quick return to the barracks soon after the disturbances subsided illustrated their discipline. [REDACTED]

Nevertheless, [REDACTED] senior officers are uncomfortable with assignments to put down civil unrest and fear that Mzali will call on them again. A recurring need to suppress disturbances, resulting in civilian casualties, would undermine the Army's cohesiveness and commitment to the regime. [REDACTED] that a group of senior officers has told Mzali that they will not support orders to deploy against unarmed civilians. The officers, in our view, are trying to dissuade Mzali from calling on them again. [REDACTED]

We believe that Mzali's efforts to strengthen the security forces, including the National Guard, are designed to lessen reliance on the Army during times of unrest. Mzali appointed tough-minded "law-and-order" men and political loyalists to the posts of Director General of National Security and Commander of the National Guard shortly after the bread riots last January. [REDACTED] he also has approved personnel increases for the National Guard and is reequipping and retraining it for riot control. Several hundred Army personnel were transferred to the National Guard two months ago part of the program, [REDACTED]

Mzali's efforts are unlikely to strengthen the internal security forces significantly. [REDACTED] the ability of the security forces to suppress domestic unrest is seriously hampered by organizational, training, equipment, and intelligence problems, by manpower shortages, and by political rivalries in the command structure. This means that Mzali will have to call on the Army to put down unrest, which may prompt the officer corps to throw its weight behind a replacement and the rank-in-file to perform in a lukewarm fashion. [REDACTED]

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Prospects

There is little likelihood that Tunisia is in for an economic boom and the ruling elite is not going to reallocate power and wealth in any meaningful way. The domestic scene, therefore, is likely to become more volatile over time, providing opportunities for extremist Muslims and radical leftist trade union members to gain influence and for foreign states such as Libya to promote instability. In the worst case, the militants in Tunisia's labor and Islamic movements will take control of their organizations or establish splinter groups with broad appeal. This would endanger the fragile wage agreements between labor and government and probably result in disorders, sporadic terrorism against symbols of government authority, and intervention by the armed forces. [REDACTED]

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Bourguiba's stubborn resistance to reform is generating the political climate conducive to such disorders. The inept leadership of Mzali has made him the immediate target of discontent, but Tunisia's social and political problems go beyond Mzali to the authoritarian order established by the President. If Mzali is removed from office--and this appears doubtful in the near term--Mzali's successor is likely to encounter similar difficulties in gaining political credibility. Mzali's removal, however, might temporarily ease discontent and position a leader with stronger political skills to assume the presidency if Bourguiba dies soon after the new prime minister is appointed. [REDACTED]

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We believe that Bourguiba's death or incapacitation and Mzali's succession could ignite popular protests. There would also be bitter political squabbling within official circles. The US Embassy in Tunis reports there is increasing discussion among some Tunisians of military intervention and we believe that if a succession crisis were prolonged there would be direct military participation in the political process. [REDACTED]

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Worsening domestic problems in Tunisia almost certainly will stimulate expanded Libyan troublemaking. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] Libyan leader Qadhafi, [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] may already be urging radical Muslims to exploit unrest. Recent antiregime demonstrations at Tunis University were sponsored by a radical fundamentalist faction sympathetic to Libya. The recent infiltration across the Tunisian border of Libyan dissidents intending to assassinate Qadhafi will harden his resolve. [REDACTED]

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Implications for the United States

The US Embassy in Tunis reports that resentment toward US policies in the Middle East among increasingly radicalized young Tunisians is growing rapidly. The Embassy says that these attitudes, influenced by Arab arguments of a US bias toward Israel, have begun to affect political debates in official circles. Tunisian leaders cannot ignore this body of opinion with impunity. These attitudes have resulted in increasingly vitriolic attacks on US policies in the Tunisian press--even in government-controlled publications. Tunis's role as headquarters of the Arab League means that these statements carry more weight in Arab circles than Tunisia's small size and population would merit. [REDACTED]

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We believe the Tunisian Government may soon begin withholding some diplomatic support for the United States and strengthening its pro-Arab and nonaligned posture in response to those domestic pressures. Tunisia's continued dependence on US military and economic assistance--it has received over \$1 billion in US economic aid alone since 1956--mitigate against stronger anti-US actions any time soon. Tunisian military officers are well-disposed to the US, and Bourguiba himself has often referred to the US Sixth Fleet as Tunisia's "shield in the Mediterranean." [REDACTED]

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Although less likely, Tunisia's need to demonstrate its non-aligned credentials may push it closer to the Soviet Union in the post-Bourguiba era. This--in the worst case--could complicate US strategic planning in the region. US contingency planning for a NATO-Warsaw Pact war presumes uninterrupted naval movement between the eastern and western Mediterranean through the Sicily Strait, a 140 kilometer-wide passage between Tunisia and Sicily. A Tunisian regime that allows substantial Soviet access to Tunisian facilities would compel NATO to devote more assets to keeping this vital sea lane open during wartime. Soviet Navy vessels are now permitted port calls and use of Tunisian ship repair facilities under a commercial agreement. [REDACTED]

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